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## Using Video in the Language Classroom : A Discussion and Sample Curriculum.

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### Introduction

This paper deals with the advantages of using video in the university-level language classroom. It begins with a brief discussion of video use and then gives the reader a “template” around which a lesson plan can be built. It will give suggestions about how to incorporate the four language skills: listening, speaking, writing, and reading into the video lesson plan and will hopefully aid the reader in harnessing the natural enthusiasm that students have for the video medium to the advantage of language acquisition and cultural understanding.

Of all the frustrations facing today's language teacher (both native and non-native) probably the one most universally shared is finding a course of study that will sufficiently engage the learner while at the same time facilitate language acquisition. Even within the same classroom differing levels of experience, competence, confidence, motivation, and individual learning styles combine to create a formidable challenge to the implementation of a program that will interest everyone. For those who have yet to experience the miracle, I am pleased to report that the age of technology has provided us with a solution to this ostensibly insoluble pedagogical conundrum. It lies in the utterance of one simple eight-word

sentence: "Would you like to watch a movie today?" Suddenly, the once disparate voices join together in a nearly unanimous chorus of assent.

Unfortunately, this is typically where the unanimity ends as the students' motivation for embracing a movie and the teacher's intended goal are usually at odds. Students have been conditioned throughout life to regard movies as passive entertainment and, in the classroom, welcome them as a respite from the more "conventional" teaching practices. The language teacher, on the other hand, sees the movie as an opportunity to bring into the classroom the world in which the foreign language exists, as the chance to invite the students into that world and, hopefully, to enhance language skills through such exposure to it.

The objective of producing students who can not only utilize the target language but also understand the cultural, social, economic and political backgrounds of that language is no longer solely at the discretion of the teacher. In today's language classroom it is a goal that is often expected by their respective institutions (Hill 1989). The classroom video can be an excellent vehicle to utilize in making these inroads. According to Donchin (1985), video allows students to experience the target culture as well as to gain paralinguistic information and reinforce points of grammar. Riley (1981) concurs with the sociocultural and linguistic benefits and certainly there have been ample studies conducted in the last twenty years to indicate that classroom video usage is not only academically acceptable, but is desirable by the serious educator.

Sadly though, this emerging medium has often been misused and, as a result, its efficacy as an educational tool has come into question. Each of us has probably seen firsthand, or has heard stories about "educators" popping in a video and using it as a de facto teacher replacement. Misuses such as this have served to create a bias against the use of video by some members of the teaching community who denounce it as either nonacademic or

somehow indicative of lethargy on the part of the teacher. Such abuse of the technology is obviously not condoned in this paper, for video can not and should not be intended to stand alone as a teacher replacement (Hutchings 1984).

Video is no less vulnerable to poor pedagogical practice than are the materials used with more "traditional" teaching methods. Just as it is inconceivable that past misuses of his works would cause anyone to consider the removal of Shakespeare from an English literature curriculum, conscientious professionals should not be deterred from incorporating film into theirs. Undoubtedly, the medium is not to blame in these unfortunate instances; the problem lies in the application of it.

If used advantageously, videos engage the student through visual and aural input and show the natural use of the target language in a variety of situations. Students can witness a disparate group of participants employing an array of accents, idiomatic terminologies, and body languages that even the most energetic among us could never hope to replicate. Further, if conscientiously applied, the use of video in the classroom should require more effort on the part of the educator, rather than less. As Wood (1995) states, the real communication in the class must occur between the teacher and the students, and the students themselves, with the participants being continually being shaped in the three-way process. Substantive video usage therefore, like most language teaching, is a highly interactive and demanding undertaking.

What follows are practical suggestions for developing a lesson plan using video in the classroom. It is based on a unit that I developed for Japanese university students using the commercial movie, *Dead Poets Society* (DPS). Although a familiarity with the film is useful, it not necessary. This "template" should lend itself freely to a variety of films, and can be applied to whatever vehicle the reader feels most appropriate.

I have been using and revising this lesson plan over the last 3

years and have found it effective with a variety of competency levels. However, as with many lessons, I have had the most success with it when I set my expectations very high. Although I understand the concern that the lesson will be overly difficult for the target class, I suggest that the teacher set the bar a little too high rather than the opposite. The curriculum is designed to provide multiple opportunities for understanding and the students are remarkably adept at exploiting them. Further, once the unit has begun, the teacher will find it far easier to revise the standards downward than upward should such an adjustment become necessary. Because the unit requires the students to follow very specific instructions and to rely on their classmates to complete the assignments, I suggest that it not be attempted until the semester is far enough along that the teacher and the students are comfortable with each other and, most importantly, the students are comfortable with each other.

This lesson plan was designed and modified to accommodate my individual goals and teaching style. Differing situations and teaching techniques could and should warrant modifications to the unit and the reader is strongly encouraged to make them.

### **Film: Criteria for Selection**

Predictably, the first step is to decide a suitable movie around which to design the lesson plan. Documentaries, historical narratives, historical dramas, educational films, social issue films, drama, mystery and suspense, animation, and films without narration could all be considered academically appropriate subjects of study depending on the teacher's goals (Stoller, (1988:6). I wanted to build on Ruane's assertion that, "Once student attention is engaged and held by a particular video extract, language will be acquired (1989: 31)." The objective of my class is to facilitate language acquisition through the three-way process mentioned earlier.

Apart from the inherent aural and visual advantages that videos provide, I sought to use the film as a springboard to in-depth classroom discussions and student interaction. I wanted the video to generate enough interest so that the students would stretch their skills to the limit from a sheer desire to understand the movie and then willingly join the discussions in order to give their views about it. With these considerations in mind, I decided on *DPS* because it filled the following four objectives:

- Age and cultural appropriateness: The personal and educational problems confronting the adolescent protagonists are universal and would allow the Japanese students to draw links with their own experiences. There is little profanity or other "adult" material in the film, so I was further pleased that these topics would not need to be addressed.
- Degree of difficulty: The film was neither so esoteric in nature nor so colloquial in dialogue that the less advanced students would be made to feel alienated and therefore inclined to give up on the film. Conversely, the content was challenging enough to place demands on even the most advanced learner.
- Moral Dilemma: It was necessary that the film provide at least one conflict upon which the students could draw both objective and subjective conclusions, have a discussion, and feel sufficiently inspired to defend their points of view. The formulation of these views was essential because they would be used both in class discussions and on the final exam. *DPS* provided these dilemmas in abundance as each of the central characters (both adolescent and adult) could possibly have done something to prevent the death of Neil Perry.
- Availability: Homework, quizzes and tests would be assigned as a result of the viewing. Because many of the

students would not attain maximum comprehension of the material during the class period, it was necessary to utilize a film that could be obtained by the media center or, at minimum, be easily located in video stores for those who sought to do so.

\*Note: Regardless of the type of film selected, it is recommended that the classroom version be uncaptioned. The absence of captions forces students to develop meaning solely from the natural dialogue and actions of the characters. Further, it frees them and the teacher from the distraction of incomplete and often incorrect translations. Of course some students will subsequently rent a captioned version of the film. As long as it is made clear to them that captioned videos are for study purposes only and that all quiz and test questions will be based solely upon the English dialogue, the use of captioned videos should be regarded as positive and even be encouraged.

### Structure

Each 90 minute class is divided into 7 short segments: *introduction, viewing session 1, worksheet, group session 1, viewing session 2, group session 2, and answer review*. Some segments can be as short as 5 minutes and, with the exception of the actual viewing of the film, can be adjusted at the teacher's discretion. Because students will develop specific viewing and study habits, it is recommended that the same format be employed for every class. While 7 segments in 90 minutes may seem ambitious, the changes from aural/visual, written, and oral activities are advantageous. The segments are short enough in duration to keep most of the students focused on the task at hand, while being varied enough to accommodate disparate learning styles.

***Introduction:*** It is important to provide a pre-viewing introduction

for each new section of the movie to be studied (Schrum & Glisan, 1994). This introduction functions to generate an interest in the film and gives students some hints about what to watch for. Further, a given number of students will have previously seen any of the commercially produced films available. These students often believe that they, having seen the film in captioned form, understand its content and therefore can take a relaxed approach to the lesson. By introducing underlying themes from the film that they had missed, or discussing issues that they had previously not considered, they quickly realize that a deeper understanding is expected of them and that their full attention will be necessary.

A central conflict in *DPS* is whether or not the adolescent students will be able to “find their own voices” as their somewhat unconventional English teacher, Mr. Keating, implores them to do. Standing squarely in the path of this burgeoning self-realization is a traditional pair of villains: the establishment (Welton Academy) and their parents.

The issue of adolescent self-realization and the struggle with authority figures are universal conflicts and therefore serve as a good entry point into the film. Before beginning the video, I start with a discussion about the personal goals that my students have, the obstacles that confront them, and what they perceive as a good teacher/student relationship. All opinions proffered during this discussion are considered valid and I am careful not to suggest any personal perspectives. Should I let my viewpoint be known, it will be the one adopted by the majority of students and future attempts to have an exchange of fresh ideas will suffer. Instead I find it best to play “devil’s advocate” during the discussions and introduce differing points of view for the class to evaluate.

**Viewing session 1:** There seems to be little agreement on the appropriate length of time for showing a video clip, but Stoller (1988: 7) judiciously offers that for using videos as “springboards

for other activities, it is important to select films/videotapes that are long enough to convey meaningful content, yet short enough to allow classroom time for pre-viewing and post-viewing activities.” I have found 15-20 minute segments to be the most successful. It has been my experience that anything longer than 20 minutes is overly challenging for some students and leads to frustration and loss of attention. I divided the movie into 7, 15-20 minute vignettes, each of which provides at least one point of “meaningful content” around which I can build a discussion.

The segment is shown in its entirety. The students are asked to pay close attention to the film and to consider the points brought out in the pre-viewing discussion. However, I ask that they view the film only and not take notes. This is done to create a safe environment where the learners can relax with the knowledge that there are no expectations for this portion of the film. It enables the students to focus on the dialogue, body language, and interaction of the characters rather than splitting their attention between the video and their notebooks.

**Worksheet:** Following the first viewing session, each student is given a worksheet to complete. I assign these worksheets each week and they are designed around the unit just viewed. They are intended to help the students assess their comprehension of the segment and typically contain 7-10 objective questions of varying difficulty and one short subjective essay question.

The subjective essay question is assigned each week for homework. It serves to give the students weekly practice for the essay question that will be presented on the final exam and requires a deeper and more personal consideration of the film. The response to this opinion question need be no longer than one paragraph in length, but it is essential that it be completed weekly. Depending on class size and workload, it may not be practical for the teacher to review these essays each week. Typically, I ask for them at random once



or twice during the 7-week session. This is usually enough to keep the students alert to the fact that the essays are important and motivate them to complete the assignment. As with the final exam essay, credit is assigned based on depth of thought, effort, and attention to English usage.

The worksheet should also function as a study guide for the final exam. As an aid to the student, I include a list of 10 or 12 useful vocabulary words from the sequence on each worksheet. I do not supply definitions and these words are intended to promote self-study. Although some of these words may appear in a question on the final exam, I do not test vocabulary. This is the result of time constraints rather than an opposition to vocabulary testing. I have found that although useful, it diverts valuable time from the discussion portions of the class. However, vocabulary can easily be added and teachers with different priorities may wish to give it a larger role in their lesson plan.

Each worksheet should contain several questions that even the more challenged students can readily answer. If there are for example 10 questions on a sheet, 4 will typically be accessible to everyone. This is done not only with the purpose of engaging even the less advanced students in the class, but also to provide a quick reference that can be used for subsequent study. An example of this type of basic question would include asking the names of key characters or questions about other more obvious or repetitive elements from the sequence.

The remaining questions should prove more challenging and should provide a motivation for the more advanced students to remain engaged. These questions deal with less apparent information and require careful attention to the viewing sequence. It is suggested that these questions introduce or reinforce ideas important to the lesson and not be esoteric in nature. An example from *DPS* is a question that asks for the name of the person whose portrait is hanging on the classroom wall. In this case, the portrait is of Walt

Whitman. Mr. Keating quickly refers to the picture as "W.W., Uncle Walt," and makes a passing gesture towards it. However, Whitman is mentioned on several other occasions in the film and is one of the "dead poets" from whom Mr. Keating adopts his "carpe diem" philosophy. The "barbaric yawp" that Todd Anderson is prodded into sounding comes from Whitman's *Song of Myself*, and it is around this portrait that the same boy composes his "Sweaty Toothed Madman" poem. It is also from Whitman that Mr. Keating takes his nickname, "Captain." By answering this type of question, the students expand and reinforce knowledge about central themes and events.

I have found these questions to be extremely useful and was surprised at the enthusiasm with which the students pursue them. It often becomes almost a game or a challenge within the group to see who can find the answer. As these are typically the higher level students who have completed the easier questions and would otherwise be bored at this point, the inclusion of these questions is highly functional.

The worksheets are given to the students after the first viewing session and I have them work alone for about 10 minutes. Being asked to work individually on the worksheet seems to give them more focus on the questions and gives them an idea of which areas they should concentrate on in the next viewing.

**Group Session 1:** After the 10 minutes of individual work, the students are asked to choose groups of 4 or 5 and quickly go over the worksheets. Once formed, students will return to the same group for all future collaborative work. While group session 1 lasts only about 5 minutes, it is of central importance to the assignment. It gives the students a chance to assimilate what they have just seen and the task now presented them. Those who are confused but are reluctant to ask for help from the teacher will readily seek clarification from their group members. This short session is more

beneficial to the Japanese learner than I initially realized. In experimenting with the lesson plan, I have eliminated this first group session several times. Without it, the second viewing session rarely achieves the same degree of enthusiasm, and I strongly recommend that it be included.

As it is expected that no student will have sufficient skills to complete the worksheets individually, a reliance on the groups should be encouraged. The groups are to use English during the collaboration and in doing so they will quickly dispense with the easier questions on the sheet. This frees them to concentrate on the more demanding material during the second viewing session. Often they will assign each other specific questions and that responsibility strengthens their interest in the second viewing sequence.

**Viewing session 2:** Now that the students have attempted the worksheet and know what information they will be responsible for, the video is shown a second time. This time, I instruct them to take notes and try to complete the worksheet as they watch. The remaining unanswered questions will be addressed in the second group session.

**Group Session 2:** At this point, the students have seen the video segment twice, and have attempted to complete the worksheet. They are instructed to rejoin their groups and help each other with the remaining answers. If the worksheets are sufficiently challenging, no student will have answered all of the objective questions and will be eager to solicit help.

During this sequence, I move about the classroom to further facilitate discussion, help with problems, and try to make certain that everyone is participating. The students are again strongly encouraged to use only English and it is typical to see several groups engaged in animated discussion. Apart from the obvious effect of honing their speaking and listening abilities, an English only rule

lessens the tendency of students to stray from the task at hand. It thereby helps avoid the discipline problems inherent in movies and group work in general. However, if it is apparent that the students have exhausted their English capabilities and are using their native language in an attempt to further explore the assignment, I often allow them to continue for as long as the discussion is productive.

**Answer review:** After about 15 minutes, the students are asked to return to their individual seats and I review their answers and address all questions. Because many of these same questions will reappear on the quiz or final, I always write the answers on the board. This guarantees that all students will leave the class with the correct information for all questions. Then, even the students who are most challenged by the film are ensured a reasonable degree of success on the tests if they devote sufficient time to studying their worksheets.

### Evaluation

**Quizzes:** In the middle of the unit, I give one short quiz that is announced a week in advance. It is composed of 4 objective questions taken directly from the worksheets and one short essay question. Only 15 minutes are allotted to complete the quiz. The essay question relates to a topic previously discussed in class. This quiz is intended to encourage the students to stay current with the study material and gives them an idea of how to prepare for the final. The essay question provides practice for the final exam, and by making notes when I grade the essay I can give the students an indication of what is and is not considered a thoughtful response. I have found that the inclusion of at least one quiz during the unit leads to significantly higher final exam scores.

**Final Exam:** The final exam is given on the week following the

completion of the unit. The test is comprised of 2 parts: an objective portion worth 60% and an essay portion worth 40%. The objective section consists of 12 short-answer objective questions worth 5 points each. Three quarters of these questions are taken directly from the worksheets and vary in their degree of difficulty. The balance are taken from material discussed in class, but not included on the worksheets. Students are reminded of this repeatedly throughout the unit. This is done so that the students will utilize their notes, study groups, and the video itself in preparation for the final and not rely solely on the worksheets.

The balance of the test is dedicated to the essay question. There are two essay questions from which to choose. These questions are intended to give students the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of both the objective and subjective elements of the video. Each question asks for an opinion, but requires as much supporting information as possible. I have found it advantageous to permit the use of dictionaries for the essay question because it assists them in formulating more thoughtful responses.

Each semester, I have been surprised at the depth of understanding that the students attain and the feeling with which they express their opinions. I initially had reservations about devoting 7 precious weeks of class time to the viewing of a film. However, I have consistently found this lesson plan to be more successful and thought provoking than even my favorite commercial language texts. Not coincidentally, this unit is also the most demanding on the students. Their feedback has repeatedly indicated that they find this lesson to be both the most difficult and the most enjoyable part of the semester.

I understand this sentiment because the same is true for me. As stated earlier, the effective use of video for language acquisition places high demands on the teacher and ones which I was not at all certain that I could meet adequately. It takes a lot of work to run this unit productively, but upon seeing the success and satisfaction

that the students derive from it, it usually becomes my favorite part of the semester as well. It is my hope that some of the suggestions offered in this abbreviated template will assist the reader in arriving at a similar conclusion.

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